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SUBJECT: ST. PETERSBURGERS HESITANT TO LABEL U.S. AN ALLY, POLL SHOWS

REF: ST. PETERSBURG 082

¶1. Summary. According to a recent poll, only a minority of St. Petersburg residents consider the U.S. to be a "friend" of Russia, while the perception that China is a close Russian ally is quickly growing. At the same time, however, a majority of residents now deem the U.S. to be closer to a friend of Russia than an enemy in a significant shift over the last six years. The poll's lead researcher told us that negative attitudes could be attributed to lingering cold war animosity, while exchange and travel to the U.S. were positively influencing opinions, an idea borne out by our research (See reftel). End Summary.

¶2. In June 2008 the Agency for Social Information, a respected independent research organization, polled 500 area residents on their attitudes towards foreign nations. According to the results, just 34 percent of St. Petersburgers believe the U.S. is a friendly nation vis-`-vis Russia, down from 39 percent in ¶2002. In more encouraging news, the percentage of residents who consider the US to be either "friendly" or "friendlier than hostile" increased from 48 percent in 2002 to 57 percent in ¶2008. The rise is linked with an 11 percent drop in locals who are neutral in their opinions of the U.S., decreasing from 31 percent in 2002 to 20 percent in 2008.

¶3. Meanwhile, eight percent of respondents view the U.S. as Russia's enemy. This figure is up two percent from 2002, which falls within the survey's standard error. The percentage of those who consider the U.S. to be more hostile to Russia than it is friendly remained constant at 16 percent.

¶4. In contrast, a majority (62 percent) of residents consider China to be a solid ally of Russia, with just less than 2 percent viewing it as an adversary. Perceptions of China changed significantly from 2002 to 2008 during which the percentage of Petersburgers who believed China to be either friendly or friendlier than not jumped from 54 to 77 percent. Only 5.8 percent of those polled felt China to be more hostile to Russia than friendly.

¶5. The country enjoying the highest regard as an ally among Petersburgers is neighboring Finland at 83.3 percent. The majority of respondents (69 percent) also viewed Japan and Germany more favorably than not. Iraq, on the other hand, received the lowest results with just 30.5 percent viewing the country as Russia's ally and 2.7 percent believing that Iraq is an enemy.

¶6. The poll did not query for explanations of respondents' views, and the lead sociologist at the research institute was hesitant to draw conclusions from the results. However, he told us that in his opinion a cold-war hangover among senior citizens

and their influence on their grandchildren, whom they often help raise due to working parents, might explain the relatively high "enemy" rating for the U.S. On the other hand, he speculated that increased travel by locals to the U.S. has engendered positive attitudes towards the country, and he stressed that more cultural and people-to-people exchanges were important to overcome differences. Concerning local media, he conceded that the press plays a role in shaping opinions, but did not say to what extent.

¶7. Comment. The poll reveals a St. Petersburg society divided in its opinion of the U.S. The survey, however, falls short of exploring the complexity of driving factors behind the current trends. If true that views of area youth are being negatively prejudiced by nostalgic grandparents, our research shows that growing travel to the U.S. among young people is counteracting this bias. In Post's questioning of returned Summer Work and Travel participants, the vast majority said their U.S. experience and interaction with Americans positively influenced their opinion of the country, an indication that people-to-people contact can indeed play a constructive role in creating positive attitudes towards the U.S. End Comment.

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